



IN HEAVEN AS
IT IS ON EARTH

Joseph Smith and the
Early Mormon Conquest of Death

SAMUEL MORRIS BROWN

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PREFACE

This work began as an exploration of the role of angelic messengers in early Mormonism. As my pregnant wife, our toddling daughter, and I made our way through the town cemetery in Camden, Maine, imagining the life stories behind the laconic engravings on worn grave markers, I was struck by the fact that the angels of early Mormonism were visitors not only from heaven but also from beyond the grave. This recognition, coupled with my professional experience as a physician with life-threatening illness and death, fueled an expansion of the initial project into a broader view of Joseph Smith's vision of the complex and abiding interactions between the living and the dead. As I turned to familiar sources with an eye to the question of mortality, I discovered a rich network of interconnected narratives. This book is the final result of the investigations begun that day in Camden.

I am fortunate to have friends and colleagues (especially and alphabetically Lavina Fielding Anderson, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Philip Barlow, Kevin Barney, my siblings and their spouses, Diane Brown, Matthew Bowman, Kathleen Flake, Stephen Fleming, Lisa Gabbert, Terry Givens, David Grua, Kristine Haglund, Blair Hodges, Kate Holbrook, Robin Jensen, Greg Kearney, Brad Kramer, Scott Neville, Jonathon Penny, Paul Reeve, Jana Riess, Brett Rushforth, Bill Smith, Jonathan Stapleton, John G. Turner, and Kris Wright) who as readers and scholars have vastly improved my research and writing, though they are not to blame for any oversights and misinterpretations that persist. I specifically thank Glen Leonard for his support and encouragement when I began to study Mormonism. I am grateful to my editors, Cynthia Read and Charlotte Steinhardt, for their gracious wisdom, good humor, and support throughout this process. I also thank Bill Slaughter and his staff at the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, for their help with images, and Brett Dowdle, my able research assistant.

My work as an intensive care unit physician funded this research, and I am most grateful to the patients and families whose stunning courage in the face of death was a significant factor in my decision to undertake this work. These individuals and their wisdom have accompanied me throughout this intellectual journey.

I thank *Church History*, *Journal of Mormon History*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and *International Journal of Mormon Studies* for permission to include material originally published in their journals. Portions of this work have been presented at meetings of the American Academy of Religion, Mormon History Association, BYU Studies Symposium, Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, and Mormon Theology Seminar, among others.

I dedicate this book to my wife and children. I cannot imagine life or death without them. If indeed the Divine message is the eternity of a form of family intimacy, then I am of all men most blessed.

ABBREVIATIONS

- APR** Joseph Smith, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith, Jr.*, ed. Scott Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989).
- CHL** Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah
- D&C** *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 1981).
- EJ** *Elders' Journal of the Church of Latter Day Saints*, Kirtland, Ohio, October–November 1837, Far West, Missouri, July–August 1838.
- EMD** *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2004).
- EMS** *The Evening and the Morning Star*, Independence, Missouri, June 1832–July 1833; Kirtland, Ohio, December 1833–September 1834.
- EPB** *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, H. Michael Marquardt, comp. and ed., (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007).
- FWR** *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844*, Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983).
- GAEL** “Grammar and A[l]phabet of the English Language,” MS 1294/5, CHL.
- HBLL** L. Tom Perry Library Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University Provo, Utah.
- HC** *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 1: History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, by Himself*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953).
- JD** *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: LDS Bookseller's Depot, 1854–86).
- JSPJ1** *Joseph Smith Papers, Journals*, vol. 1, 1832–1839, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008).
- JSPR1** *Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009).
- JSR** H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).
- KEQR** *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record: 1836–1841*, Lyndon Cook and Milton Backman, eds., (Provo, Utah: Grandin, 1985).
- LB** Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001).
- M&A** *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Kirtland, Ohio, October 1834–September 1837.
- MS** *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Manchester, England, May 1840–March 1842; Liverpool, April 1842–March 3, 1932; London, March 10, 1932–December 1970.
- NewT** *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, Scott Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Mathews, eds., (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2013).

University, 2004).

- SelCol* LDS Church Archives, *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2 vols. (DVD) (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2002).
- T&S* *Times and Seasons*, Commerce/Nauvoo, Illinois, November 1839–February 1846.
- WJS* *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook (Provo, Utah: Grandin, 1991).
- WWJ* Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, Typescript*, ed. Scott Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–85).

In Heaven as It Is on Earth

Introduction

Death has presided over life for all of human history. Whether and how the self can survive beyond the grave and what it means to live in the face of inevitable extinction are central religious and intellectual problems for almost all human beings and cultures. While various thinkers have claimed that no human can imagine her own death (a consciousness cannot conceive itself without consciousness), people have always wondered at and worried over the prospect of death, seeking explanations, condolences, and strategies when faced with the possibility that life will cease. Sociologist Peter Berger's eloquent phrase, "the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."¹

Contemporary Western societies have brought new technological tools to their struggle with death, but these tools have problems of their own. In modern America, at least 14 percent of gross domestic product is devoted to biomedical negotiations with illness, and, inexorably, death. Despite, or perhaps in part because of, vast financial and technical outpourings, a wide variety of voices have argued that the modern West has lost its ability to confront death.²

This was not always the case. Before a process dubbed the "Dying of Death" by which theologians, physicians, and others downplayed the significance of death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans possessed a remarkably robust death culture with roots stretching from medieval Christianity through early modern England into the colonial churches and antebellum evangelicalism. These Americans knew death intimately, confronted it regularly, and brought significant cultural resources to these encounters. The early nineteenth century particularly distinguished itself with a potent emphasis on the deathbed, eternal community, and melodramatic bereavement, what scholars have called the "good," "beautiful," or "happy" death, though I will suggest that "holy death" more adequately captures the meanings of these cultural phenomena.

Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844; see [figure 0.1](#)) is perhaps the most famous and successful of the alternative Christian voices to arise in the spiritual agitation of early nineteenth-century America. Smith has struck different observers as an imperialist, a satyr, a charlatan, a sectarian primordialist, a folk magician, an untreated frontal-lobe epileptic, and a hermetic magus.³ There is some truth in many of these narratives about the Mormon founder, but most have failed to appreciate how concerned Smith was with death and its conquest. In his 1844 swan song sermon commemorating the death of a Mormon elder, Smith proclaimed to his followers, "I will open your eyes in rel[ation] to your dead." This statement is perhaps more accurate a summary of Smith's religious activity than almost any other.



Figure 0.1 Portrait of Joseph Smith Jr. Image courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

While a handful of authors, most prominently Douglas Davies, have discussed death in Mormonism, most treatments have refracted Mormon death culture through the later Utah period. None has treated the cultural contexts and documentary record of earliest Mormonism in detail.⁵ This study attempts to make sense of several questions. How did death affect the first generation of Mormons? What did these believers find in Smith's "dispensation" of divine light to prepare them for their encounter with the King of Terrors? What would their prophet's innovations and modifications of cultural themes have meant for them personally? Whereas Davies's elegant and persuasive treatment of the Mormon "culture of salvation" has drawn broad and compelling interpretive outlines for Latter-day Saint theology and practice, situating Mormonism anthropologically while describing the communal nature of Mormon salvation, this study paints a detailed portrait of the social and religious milieu in which Smith proclaimed his new religious tradition and his very specific responses to that world. When, following Davies, I refer to death "conquest," I mean a set of approaches to the meaning of life, a framing of aspirations for the afterlife, and controversies about the security and stability of salvation, as expressed in human struggles with mortality. When and under what circumstances life ends, how much of earthly experience will persist, and what constitutes preparation for death are problems that can be distinguished from the question of salvation per se. Framing Mormonism as an attempted conquest of death illuminates its theology and enriches the texture of the lived experience of believers.

The story of earliest Mormonism confirms historian Robert Orsi's argument that religion central

creates, sustains, and interprets relationships, both “real” and “imagined,” between heaven and earth. The ideas that sustain these relationships come both from the lived experience of lay believers—which scholars call “lived religion”—and from theological claims made by Mormon leaders.⁷ Though my sympathies are with the lived religion approach to history, Mormonism particularly demonstrates the limits to the asserted distinction between theology and lived religion. The leaders of early Mormonism are the types of generally marginalized voices that students of lived religion attempt to uncover. Joseph Smith Jr. particularly lived, breathed, and preached concepts familiar from lived religion: medical and paramedical practices, fluid application and development of ritual forms, folk beliefs that speak more to life’s exigencies than formal theology. Because in early Mormonism the leader is often difficult to separate from the followers (a point that amused contemporary Protestant critics), I consider them together. These believers were coming to terms with and protesting preexisting traditions as they attempted to discern their place in society and the world at large through the lens of divine revelation. Scriptures, sermons, poems, hymns, journals, and artifacts are all vital conduits both to understanding the aspirations of a group of people struggling on the fringes of American Protestantism to make sense of life and death and to appreciating the “cultural work” that Mormonism performed for them.⁸

In this study I have attempted to present a sympathetic and rigorous view of early Mormons, giving voice to the individuals and ideas I have encountered without molding them to the exigencies of devotion, polemics, or apologia. I have made no attempt in this book to assess the veracity of Joseph Smith’s religious claims. I have, however, attempted to present Smith’s concerns, ideas, and innovations as I believe he understood them. I explore the sacred texts he promulgated while leaving to the reader the question of whether he influenced the texts, they influenced him, or both. However they were created, these texts represented an important part of Joseph Smith’s religious vision, and he cannot be understood without them.

I have largely ignored later developments in Latter-day Saint traditions in this study. I hope that readers of this book will experience what historian Peter Brown has called “salutary vertigo,” an illuminating disorientation based in clarifying the foreignness of a seemingly familiar culture.⁹ Some within the faith will find my analysis too secular, while some outside observers will complain that I have been too kind to the people whose stories I tell. A balanced treatment will necessarily brook such criticism, but I hope that the majority of readers will be served by this salutary vertigo.

In terms of nomenclature, I have intended to explore and present the idea-world that Joseph Smith and his followers inhabited. His followers I refer to variously as Latter-day Saints, Saints, or Mormons for stylistic reasons only. Given long-standing Mormon tradition, I occasionally refer to Smith as Joseph or the Prophet, to fit the flow of the prose. Because this story contains so many people surnamed Smith, I often use first names to refer to other members of the Smith family. Because this is a story about antebellum believers, I refer to the God (or LORD, in the King James idiom) of the Hebrew Bible, usually transliterated Yahweh, as Jehovah unless I am referring to a specific Hebrew text or phrase. With reference to America’s Native peoples, I have employed a mixture of Mormon, antebellum, and modern terms. Where a specific culture group is identified, I have attempted to use the tribal name. Where several tribes or “native” as opposed to “white” peoples are intended, I have referred to them as Native peoples, occasionally by the Mormon name “Lamanites,” and rarely by the term Indian, as dictated by the context. In attempting to re-create the conceptual world of early Mormonism, I have used the fraught term “patriarch” to describe a particular type of biblical figure or the Latter-day Saints when they identified themselves with such figures. By “patriarchal,” the term early Latter-day Saints favored, I intend the collection of beliefs, rites, and mystical powers with which Smith announced he was creating a genealogical system

encompass the entire human family, based in a reinterpretation of the biblical patriarchs. Allowing these terms to bear the weight they bore in the early nineteenth century should contribute to the salutary vertigo induced by this study.

Joseph Smith claimed to be a translator-seer whose scriptures largely derived from grave artifacts. He first described entombed gold plates in the 1820s New York countryside, at a hill he called Cumorah. These plates, protected by their author—a resurrected proto-Indian named Moroni—gave voice to America's dead in the 1830 Book of Mormon, which the Saints affirmed as ancient scripture and critics rejected as an antebellum fraud. This scripture is bookended by two father-son pairs—Lehi and Nephi begin the narrative as they flee Jerusalem for America around 600 BCE, while Mormon (the prophetic figure who edited and compiled the writings of the American prophets up to his day) and Moroni conclude the narrative with the extinction of Nephite civilization by the savage Lamanites—whom antebellum Mormons considered to be ancestors of Indians—at a mass grave at Cumorah. The scripture contains the story of still other gold plates, this time of the Jaredites, an earlier tribe that fled the Tower of Babel, retaining the ancient language of Eden in their flight to America. Though they called it Ramah instead of Cumorah, the Jaredites also died at the same hill that witnessed the Nephite extinction and contained the plates of the Book of Mormon for almost two millennia.

After the Book of Mormon emerged as a distinctive grave artifact in the late 1820s, Joseph Smith continued to explore relics and rituals central to the problem of death. In the 1830s, after moving to Ohio, Smith acquired and interpreted Egyptian mummies and their funerary papyri. Finally arriving in Illinois, where he founded a biblical-sounding utopia called Nauvoo, Smith elaborated his religious vision, encompassing an afterlife theology that could vanquish death, ensure permanent personal election, and maintain the human family intact forever in a sacerdotal structure. To this end, Smith drew on, adapted, and reformulated rites and doctrines from sources inside and outside normative Protestantism, yielding an intensely biblical system that combined elements of the Radical Reformation, Western esotericism, and Christian perfectionism. By the time of his death, Smith had revealed a polyvalent family system, a utopian communitarianism grounded in mystical traditions about Enoch, a temple liturgy that taught his followers how to negotiate the afterlife and promise them postmortal divinity, and a scandalously anthropomorphic God whom all humans could call Father. These surprisingly varied themes and innovations of early Mormonism find coherence in Smith's encounters with, and attempted conquest of, death.

I have subdivided the book into two parts that reflect the key themes of Joseph Smith's death and conquest. The first concerns death and the dead, while the second describes Smith's construction of immortal communities. Joseph confronted death early and often in a culture much accustomed to premature mortality, a setting I describe in detail in [chapter 1](#), situating the broader culture and the deathbed scenes that proved central to Smith family history. This death culture informed, even transformed, Smith's encounters with leitmotifs in antebellum America, including reverence for the corpse ([chapter 2](#)), the treasure quest and grave relics ([chapter 3](#)), and the hallowing of ground by interred human remains, particularly the ubiquitous grave mounds of Native peoples ([chapter 4](#)). In each of these cases, Smith derived a measure of connection to sacred ancestors that contributed to his final system of death conquest. These concerns provide an interpretive framework for understanding what has been misunderstood as an idiosyncratic variant of prophethood—seerhood—which Smith saw as the ability to vanquish the devastating silence of the grave ([chapter 5](#)).

In part II, I describe the types of specific communities—families—that Smith created in his conquest of death. In a four-chapter arc, I describe the temple cultus (an integrated body of rites, beliefs, and behaviors within a religious system), the capstone of Smith's conquest of death, moving from its origins in a modified covenantal theology and understanding of seals and the mission of the

prophet Elijah ([chapter 6](#)) to the incorporation of translated Masonic motifs into a highly potent death and resurrection in Nauvoo ([chapter 7](#)) and the genealogical reformation of the Great Chain of Being toward which the temple rites directed believers ([chapter 8](#)). Because I believe the most notorious aspect of Smith's heaven family, polygamy, must be understood in the context of the genealogical Chain of Being, I cover polygamy—"celestial marriage"—in [chapter 8](#).

Smith famously commented on multiple occasions that he would be happy in hell if only he could be there with his friends. In these coarse and scandalous statements Smith was defining heaven as the place where his loved ones would finally gather. In many respects the temple and related rites underscored this central insight. I conclude the narrative arc with an exploration of what I call Smith's divine anthropology, his incorporation of a heavily anthropomorphic God and deified humans into the upper echelons of a reformulated Chain of Being ([chapter 9](#)). In this divine anthropology stands a soteriological rather than devotional *imitatio Christi*, a version of the Chain of Being in which Jesus pointed the way for humanity in its quest for perfection. In the divine anthropology, the traditional Christian view of merger into the body of Christ became a merger into the family of Christ, a merger that saw itself in Christ's life and teachings. This represented a radical, sacramental response to Protestantism. In place of Victorian piety, evangelical fervor, or Calvinist election, Smith assured his followers that he would take them to heaven himself through the rites and authorities of his priesthood power.

After investigating Smith's contexts and religious revelations, I explore the meaning of his death at the hands of a vigilante mob, deemed a martyrdom by the Latter-day Saints even before he had breathed his last on that afternoon in June 1844 ([chapter 10](#)). His community, suddenly bereft of its prophet, invoked the symbolically potent threads of martyrdom to come to terms with their "afflicting casualty." Simultaneously the community fractured along the lines of tension Smith had attempted to mediate, with the major group following his sacerdotal family and the other coalescing around his biological family. Smith's death was a test case for the theology he had been propagating throughout his religious career.

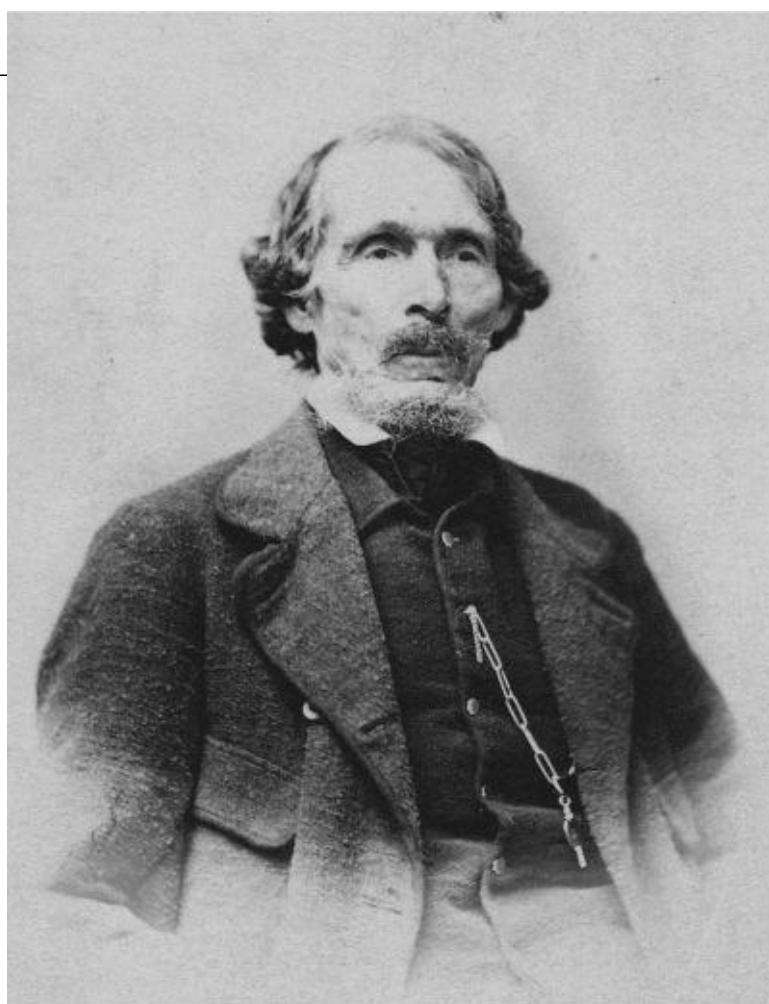


Figure 0.2 Portrait of William Wines Phelps. Phelps was Smith’s amanuensis and recorded many of the most interesting of Smith’s theological innovations early in the 1830s. Image courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Over and above the broad narrative of Smith’s conquest of death stand a variety of interrelated themes and observations. These themes inform all of the chapters, unifying them as they come into dialogue with the concepts presented separately in each chapter. Because these themes are present in so many places, I highlight them here.

First is the sense in which Smith had a revelation to make, a set of religious messages that constantly overflowed the banks of his mind. In setting after setting, his message recurred. His mode of translation was a process of finding and assembling from many sources the clues and cues that supported this revelation. Whether he was observing burial mounds or scrying stones or the King James Bible (KJV) or Masonic liturgy or funerary papyri, Smith had a message whose details arose from careful and passionate reading informed by religious experience and spiritual insight. In this book it becomes clear why Smith included “translator” in his original title of “prophet, seer, and revelator,” why he saw translation as central to his religious calling. This was more than just syncretism. Smith had a vision, a revelation—his followers believed a divine dispensation—and as his mind roamed over the conceptual landscape he inhabited, myriad phenomena came to speak of that great revelation. Smith was a translator rather than a parrot, an artist rather than a collator.

Second, Joseph Smith’s struggle against death points out the impressive reach of an Antiquarian sounding view of cosmic integration within early Mormonism. At almost every turn the heavenly world informed, illuminated, and affected the earthly world and vice versa, what some term the metaphysical law of correspondence. By acting out the drama of the cosmos, Smith and his followers

could change the course of the cosmos. The microcosm of earth life fed from and looked forward to the macrocosm of the heavens. The pedigrees of the sacerdotal heaven family mimicked and pursued the cosmic hierarchy of gods, angels, and astral bodies.

Third, understanding Mormonism requires appreciating the nature of Mormon biblical exegesis from their strong appropriation of Isaiah and Ezekiel to provide internal evidences of the Book of Mormon to a cryptic prophecy in Malachi as the key to restoring the human family. In the Book of Revelation they discovered a variety of new ideas to structure their relationships and shape their view of the life to come. The nature of this approach, one I call “marvelously literal” exegesis in order to emphasize the supernatural ends to which a specific sort of literalism worked in Mormon hands, informs almost all of early Mormonism.¹¹

The fourth motif is a person, William Wines Phelps (1792–1872; see [figure 0.2](#)). Largely forgotten among modern Mormons beyond his legacy as a hymn-writer, this lanky newspaper editor and self-made philosopher proved to be present at almost every crucial conceptual juncture in the early Mormon movement. A convert in 1831 drawn to the miraculous claims of the angel Moroni and the Book of Mormon, Phelps became editor of the first Mormon newspaper, then Smith’s amanuensis, ghostwriter, collaborator, and linguistic coach. In these various roles Phelps documented and perhaps collaborated on a wide array of crucial doctrinal developments. Contrary to the historiographic tradition that maintains that most of Smith’s theological innovations date to the 1840s, Phelps was documenting many of these themes a decade earlier. Smith seems to have relied heavily on the confident older man with a dozen languages ostensibly at his command. Whether Phelps proved at times a muse rather than a cheerleader cannot be decided on the basis of current evidence, but the newspaperman’s ability to be present at and be the voice for a wide variety of important theological developments is uncanny. Unlike the Pratt brothers, Orson (1811–1881) and Parley (1807–1857)—better-known systematizers of Smith’s thought—Phelps found no place in the hierarchy of the Utah church. Kept at arm’s length, Phelps pursued a career in jurisprudence, still promulgating the sort of energetic speculation he had pursued when Smith was alive, and he treasured the facility with ancient languages that Smith had aspired to. In these respects, Phelps represents an informative remnant of a particular strain of Mormonism that figured prominently during Smith’s life but receded over the decades following his death.

Joseph Smith’s is a complicated story with many twists and turns and possible interpretive approaches. His struggle with an almost universal concern over death provides a new vantage on the founder of a new religious movement. He did and said many things, grappled with diverse ideas, many of them framed in terms of a mythic lost perfection. However tempting it is to call him a Romantic, expressing an excessive nostalgia for past epochs, though, Smith was not merely venerating the past. The Mormon prophet was actively seeking out the dead, both past and future, and placing them in direct family relationships with himself. The Joseph Smith who emerges from this treatment is a physical and resourceful, if often unusual, man roaring in the face of death, an epic “action hero” death in the style of the ancients. He was a Heracles, a Beowulf, a Gilgamesh, an Odysseus—bound not to rout the underworld or bring down the heavens but to link the earth inextricably to them.¹²

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